



# Living, Learning, & Leading in Residence Life: A Research Study

[llresearch.umn.edu](http://llresearch.umn.edu)

## Living On Campus: Benefits for First-Generation Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Krista M. Soria & Brayden J. Roberts

First-generation students (students whose parents or guardians have not earned a bachelor's degree) constitute 45.5% of students enrolled at public and private four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16). The majority of those students are from lower-income families: 57.5% had families with incomes less than \$55,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015-16).

Despite first-generation students' prevalence on four-year college campuses nationwide, decades worth of research has revealed not only a clear pattern of disparities in their collegiate experiences but also systemic barriers leading to outcomes that continue to disadvantage first-generation students, especially those who are from low-income backgrounds. Notably, less than half (49.2%) of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who attended four-year institutions earned a bachelor's degree in five years compared to 66.1% of continuing generation students from low-income backgrounds and 80.9% of continuing generation students from upper-income backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Scholars have pointed to the types of conditions in higher education that contribute to first-generation students' lower degree completion rates; for instance, first-generation students often feel a sense of isolation, lack of belonging, and heightened marginalization on college campuses (Jehangir, 2010). The purpose of our study is to examine whether living on campus might be associated with low-income, first-generation students' belonging, perceptions of campus climate, and resilience—factors that might be associated with low-income, first-generation students' persistence and degree attainment in higher education.

## Methods

We utilized data collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), an international research program that examines the influence of higher education on undergraduates' leadership development. In spring 2018, 70 institutions participated in the MSL and each invited 4,000 randomly-selected students to participate in the survey. We only used randomly-selected students in our sample and the response rates varied between 14% to 48% across the institutions.

We further narrowed our sample to first-year students because more advanced students could have lived in any combination of off-campus or on-campus housing locations in prior years and the survey only asks students to report their current housing location. We also narrowed our sample to only include first-generation students from low-income backgrounds ( $n = 1,829$ ). We defined first-generation students in our sample as students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree or higher and we defined low-income backgrounds as students whose parents or guardians earned less than \$54,999 per year. Finally, after matching procedures, we narrowed our sample down to 642 first-generation students from low-income backgrounds (50% who lived on campus and 50% who lived off campus).

We used propensity score matching techniques to match first-generation students from low-income backgrounds in the "treatment" condition (living on campus) with first-generation students from low-income backgrounds in the "control" condition (living off campus). We used a variety of covariates in matching, including students' gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, extracurricular participation in high school, the number of hours students worked off campus or on campus, and institutional measures (i.e., size, setting, control, and Carnegie classification). We used factor analysis to create our three dependent variables: sense of belonging, perceptions of campus climate, and resilience. Finally, we analyzed the relationships between living on campus and the dependent variables using ordinary least squares regression.

## Results

The results of the analyses suggest that first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who lived on campus had a significantly higher sense of belonging ( $\beta = .555, p < .001, R^2 = .077$ ) and higher resilience ( $\beta = .637, p < .001, R^2 = .101$ ) compared to the matched group of first-generation peers from low-income backgrounds who did not live on campus. Additionally, first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who lived on campus were significantly less likely to report experiencing a hostile or discriminatory campus climate ( $\beta = -.309, p < .001, R^2 = .024$ ) compared to a matched group of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who did not live on campus.

## Implications & Policy Recommendations

The results of this research suggest that first-generation students from low-income backgrounds may experience some benefits from living on campus during their first year of enrollment. Specifically, we found that living on campus is positively associated with students' feelings of belonging on campus and their resilience. We also found that living on campus was associated with a reduction in students' beliefs that their campus was discriminatory, hostile, or unwelcoming.

Many first-generation students or students from low-income backgrounds may live off campus while enrolled in their colleges or universities so that they can stay close to family members. Others may need to live off campus due to the high expense of room and board or due to their work or family obligations. Given some of the benefits derived from living on campus, we recommend that institutional leaders take steps to encourage students to live on campus through offering scholarships, cost waivers, or expanded employment programs that help students pay for room and board fees while also helping students to earn a living wage.

Additionally, we recommend that campus leaders expand programs to encourage family involvement on campus, offer more free or heavily-discounted childcare opportunities, and increase students' wages to make it possible for them to work on campus in an area closer to their academic pursuits or intended career pathway (as opposed to working off-campus in higher-paying jobs potentially not connected to students' academic majors or future career pathways). For public universities, opportunities should be explored to provide first-gen students affordable housing as a family unit at least in close proximity to campuses.

We also advocate that housing administrators offer professional development opportunities for staff (including resident assistants or residential leaders) to help them understand some of the challenges first-generation students from low-income backgrounds encounter in higher education, especially the barriers that students experience during their first-year transition to higher education.

Another suggestion we have for institutions of higher education is to reevaluate the resources and funding that are available to students who possess some amount of privilege in the college environment, namely legacy students. To have a parent or guardian that has already earned a degree in higher education provides a benefit to continuing generation students by simply having knowledge of navigating higher education. Such benefits have an opportunity to flourish further as prospective students may be rewarded for attending their parents' alma mater. However, we advocate for equity involving all students in the realm of higher education, and more reallocation of funding to students from more disadvantaged backgrounds than more advantaged counterparts.

Finally, we recommend that housing administrators and residential life staff offer programming and services tailored specifically to first-generation students and students from low-income backgrounds to help students navigate higher education systems; connect with peers from similar prenatal education, income, or social class backgrounds; and provide opportunities for these students to share their personal experiences with others. The challenges that first-generation students from low-income backgrounds experience during their first year in higher education go beyond financial challenges—often, these students experience cultural challenges as they transition to higher education. Housing professionals, including peer advisors or resident assistants, are well-positioned to help students navigate those cultural barriers to become successful in their transition to higher education.

## Recommended APA Citation

Soria, K. M., & Roberts, B. J. (2020). *Living on campus: Benefits for first-generation students from low-income backgrounds*. University of Minnesota, Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy.

## About the Study

The Principal Investigator for this project is Dr. Krista Soria ([ksoria@umn.edu](mailto:ksoria@umn.edu)) and the Research Assistant is B.J. Roberts. The research is sponsored by the [Association of College and University Housing Officers-International](#), the [ACUHO-I Research & Education Foundation](#), and [National Association of College and University Residence Halls](#).

## References

- Jehangir, R. (2010). Stories as knowledge: Bringing the lived experience of first-generation college students into the academy. *Urban Education*, 45(4), 533-553.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015-16). *National Postsecondary Student Aid Study* (NPSAS:16). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study* (BPS:12/17). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.